

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Guy Debord

Theory of the Dérive

November 1956

Retrieved on 8th July 2021 from www.cddc.vt.edu

Originally published in *Les Lèvres Nues* #9 (November 1956),
reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* #2 (December 1958).

Translated by Ken Knabb.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Theory of the Dérive

Guy Debord

November 1956

ONE OF THE BASIC situationist practices is the *dérive* [literally: “drifting”], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

But the *dérive* includes both this letting-go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities. In this latter regard, ecological science — despite the narrow social space to which it limits itself — provides psychogeography with abundant data.

The ecological analysis of the absolute or relative character of fissures in the urban network, of the role of microclimates, of distinct neighborhoods with no relation to administrative boundaries, and above all of the dominating action of centers of attraction, must be utilized and completed by psychogeographical methods. The objective passional terrain of the *dérive* must be defined in accordance both with its own logic and with its relations with social morphology.

In his study *Paris et l'agglomération parisienne* (Bibliothèque de Sociologie Contemporaine, P.U.F., 1952) Chombart de Lauwe notes that “an urban neighborhood is determined not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighborhoods have of it.” In the same work, in order to illustrate “the narrowness of the real Paris in which each individual lives ... within a geographical area whose radius is extremely small,” he diagrams all the movements made in the space of one year by a student living in the 16th Arrondissement. Her itinerary forms a small triangle with no significant deviations, the three apexes of which are the School of Political Sciences, her residence and that of her piano teacher.

Such data — examples of a modern poetry capable of provoking sharp emotional reactions (in this particular case, outrage at the fact that anyone’s life can be so pathetically limited) — or even Burgess’s theory of Chicago’s social activities as being distributed in distinct concentric zones, will undoubtedly prove useful in developing *dérives*.

If chance plays an important role in *dérives* this is because the methodology of psychogeographical observation is still in its infancy. But the action of chance is naturally conservative and in a new setting tends to reduce everything to habit or to an alternation between a limited number of variants. Progress means breaking through fields where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favorable to our purposes. We can say, then, that the randomness of a *dérive* is fundamentally

different from that of the stroll, but also that the first psycho-geographical attractions discovered by *dérivers* may tend to fixate them around new habitual axes, to which they will constantly be drawn back.

An insufficient awareness of the limitations of chance, and of its inevitably reactionary effects, condemned to a dismal failure the famous aimless wandering attempted in 1923 by four surrealists, beginning from a town chosen by lot: Wandering in open country is naturally depressing, and the interventions of chance are poorer there than anywhere else. But this mindlessness is pushed much further by a certain Pierre Vendryes (in *Médium*, May 1954), who thinks he can relate this anecdote to various probability experiments, on the ground that they all supposedly involve the same sort of antideterminist liberation. He gives as an example the random distribution of tadpoles in a circular aquarium, adding, significantly, “It is necessary, of course, that such a population be subject to no external guiding influence.” From that perspective, the tadpoles could be considered more spontaneously liberated than the surrealists, since they have the advantage of being “as stripped as possible of intelligence, sociability and sexuality,” and are thus “truly independent from one another.”

At the opposite pole from such imbecilities, the primarily urban character of the *dérive*, in its element in the great industrially transformed cities — those centers of possibilities and meanings — could be expressed in Marx’s phrase: “Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive.”

One can *dérive* alone, but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness, since cross-checking these different groups’ impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions. It is preferable for the composition of these

groups to change from one *dérive* to another. With more than four or five participants, the specifically *dérive* character rapidly diminishes, and in any case it is impossible for there to be more than ten or twelve people without the *dérive* fragmenting into several simultaneous *dérives*. The practice of such subdivision is in fact of great interest, but the difficulties it entails have so far prevented it from being organized on a sufficient scale.

The average duration of a *dérive* is one day, considered as the time between two periods of sleep. The starting and ending times have no necessary relation to the solar day, but it should be noted that the last hours of the night are generally unsuitable for *dérives*.

But this duration is merely a statistical average. For one thing, a *dérive* rarely occurs in its pure form: it is difficult for the participants to avoid setting aside an hour or two at the beginning or end of the day for taking care of banal tasks; and toward the end of the day fatigue tends to encourage such an abandonment. But more importantly, a *dérive* often takes place within a deliberately limited period of a few hours, or even fortuitously during fairly brief moments; or it may last for several days without interruption. In spite of the cessations imposed by the need for sleep, certain *dérives* of a sufficient intensity have been sustained for three or four days, or even longer. It is true that in the case of a series of *dérives* over a rather long period of time it is almost impossible to determine precisely when the state of mind peculiar to one *dérive* gives way to that of another. One sequence of *dérives* was pursued without notable interruption for around two months. Such an experience gives rise to new objective conditions of behavior that bring about the disappearance of a good number of the old ones.

The influence of weather on *dérives*, although real, is a significant factor only in the case of prolonged rains, which make

request the use of the adjacent section on either upper or lower levels. With this setup three four-room apartments can be transformed into one twelve-room apartment in less than six hours.

them virtually impossible. But storms or other types of precipitation are rather favorable for *dérives*.

The spatial field of a *dérive* may be precisely delimited or vague, depending on whether the goal is to study a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself. It should not be forgotten that these two aspects of *dérives* overlap in so many ways that it is impossible to isolate one of them in a pure state. But the use of taxis, for example, can provide a clear enough dividing line: If in the course of a *dérive* one takes a taxi, either to get to a specific destination or simply to move, say, twenty minutes to the west, one is concerned primarily with a personal trip outside one's usual surroundings. If, on the other hand, one sticks to the direct exploration of a particular terrain, one is concentrating primarily on research for a psychogeographical urbanism.

In every case the spatial field depends first of all on the point of departure — the residence of the solo *dériveur* or the meeting place selected by a group. The maximum area of this spatial field does not extend beyond the entirety of a large city and its suburbs. At its minimum it can be limited to a small self-contained ambiance: a single neighborhood or even a single block of houses if it's interesting enough (the extreme case being a static-*dérive* of an entire day within the Saint-Lazare train station).

The exploration of a fixed spatial field entails establishing bases and calculating directions of penetration. It is here that the study of maps comes in — ordinary ones as well as ecological and psychogeographical ones — along with their correction and improvement. It should go without saying that we are not at all interested in any mere exoticism that may arise from the fact that one is exploring a neighborhood for the first time. Besides its unimportance, this aspect of the problem is completely subjective and soon fades away.

In the "possible rendezvous," on the other hand, the element of exploration is minimal in comparison with that of behav-

ioral disorientation. The subject is invited to come alone to a certain place at a specified time. He is freed from the both-
ersome obligations of the ordinary rendezvous since there is
no one to wait for. But since this “possible rendezvous” has
brought him without warning to a place he may or may not
know, he observes the surroundings. It may be that the same
spot has been specified for a “possible rendezvous” for some-
one else whose identity he has no way of knowing. Since he
may never even have seen the other person before, he will be
encouraged to start up conversations with various passersby.
He may meet no one, or he may even by chance meet the per-
son who has arranged the “possible rendezvous.” In any case,
particularly if the time and place have been well chosen, his use
of time will take an unexpected turn. He may even telephone
someone else who doesn’t know where the first “possible ren-
dezvous” has taken him, in order to ask for another one to be
specified. One can see the virtually unlimited resources of this
pastime.

- Whom must I announce to my Lord Duke?
- The young man who one evening sought to quar-
rel with him on the Pont Neuf, opposite the Sama-
rataine.
- A singular introduction!
- You will find that it is as good as another.
- Dumas (*The Three Musketeers*)

Our loose lifestyle and even certain amusements considered
dubious that have always been enjoyed among our entourage
— slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitch-
hiking nonstop and without destination through Paris during
a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion,
wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public,
etc. — are expressions of a more general sensibility which is

no different from that of the *dérive*. Written descriptions can
be no more than passwords to this great game.

The lessons drawn from *dérives* enable us to draw up the
first surveys of the psychogeographical articulations of a mod-
ern city. Beyond the discovery of unities of ambiance, of their
main components and their spatial localization, one comes to
perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their de-
fenses. One arrives at the central hypothesis of the existence
of psychogeographical pivotal points. One measures the dis-
tances that actually separate two regions of a city, distances
that may have little relation with the physical distance between
them. With the aid of old maps, aerial photographs and experi-
mental *dérives*, one can draw up hitherto lacking maps of influ-
ences, maps whose inevitable imprecision at this early stage is
no worse than that of the first navigational charts. The only dif-
ference is that it is no longer a matter of precisely delineating
stable continents, but of changing architecture and urbanism.

Today the different unities of atmosphere and of dwellings
are not precisely marked off, but are surrounded by more or
less extended and indistinct bordering regions. The most gen-
eral change that *dérive* experience leads to proposing is the
constant diminution of these border regions, up to the point of
their complete suppression.

Within architecture itself, the taste for *dériving* tends to pro-
mote all sorts of new forms of labyrinths made possible by mod-
ern techniques of construction. Thus in March 1955 the press
reported the construction in New York of a building in which
one can see the first signs of an opportunity to *dérive* inside an
apartment:

The apartments of the helicoidal building will
be shaped like slices of cake. One will be able
to enlarge or reduce them by shifting movable
partitions. The half-floor gradations avoid limit-
ing the number of rooms, since the tenant can